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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRASILIA 002763

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/04/2014

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SUBJECT: BRAZIL: RESIGNATION OF DEFENSE MINISTER VIEGAS

REF: BRASILIA 2684

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR DENNIS HEARNE. REASON: 1.4
(B)(D)

1. (C) Summary. Brazilian Minister of Defense Jose Viegas has presented his letter of resignation to President Lula da Silva, according to a 4 November Defense Ministry announcement. Vice President Jose Alencar will formally take over the defense ministry portfolio on 8 November (Minister Viegas retains authority until that date). A senior MOD official confirmed that the resignation came as a result of months of tensions and disagreements between Viegas and senior military commanders over military pensions and other institutional problems, culminating in the recent Herzog case (see reftel), in which senior army officials had not cleared with Viegas a controversial communiqu  concerning human rights abuses during Brazil's military era. Viegas has been an effective interlocutor with the USG on key issues, notably implementation of Brazil's air bridge denial (shootdown) program against aerial narcotrafficking. Mission does not view this development as an indication that Brazil's armed forces are restive and challenging civilian authority, even though Viegas' tenure will not be remembered for reinforcing the stature and effectiveness of the civilian MOD. It also remains to be seen how his successor will handle challenging issues, such as shootdown, Brazil's leadership of MINUSTAH in Haiti or complex civil aviation matters. End summary.

2. (U) Brazilian Minister of Defense Jose Viegas has presented his letter of resignation to President Lula da Silva, according to a 4 November Defense Ministry announcement. Vice President Jose Alencar will formally take over the defense ministry portfolio on 8 November, while retaining his duties as vice president. No official reason was offered for the resignation in the announcement, but there has been media speculation for several months that Viegas might depart the ministry soon after Brazil's October municipal elections.

3. (C) PolCouns spoke on 4 November with Fernando Abreu, Viegas' chief of staff. Abreu confirmed that Viegas' recent embarrassment in the Herzog case (see reftel) had been the "gota da agua" ("last drop of water," a Portuguese colloquial equivalent for "straw that broke the camel's back"), following months of tensions and disagreements between Viegas and senior military commanders over military pensions, budgets and other institutional problems. In the Herzog case, the release of a truculent communiqu  by the Brazilian army that appeared to justify human rights abuses during the military era in Brazil, and which had not been cleared by Viegas, pointed up his continued difficulty in establishing coordination and authority with the armed services. Abreu told PolCouns that the army commander, with whom Viegas has had previous difficulties, should have resigned "as a matter of honor," and that his continuation as force commander made Viegas' remaining as minister unviable.

4. (C) Abreu said that the appointment of Alencar is "a good solution" and he opined that Alencar may retain the defense portfolio indefinitely (but see para 7 below). He did not know whether Alencar would physically spend most of his time at the MOD or in the vice presidency. Abreu also confirmed speculation that Viegas, a career diplomat, would be posted as Brazil's Ambassador in Madrid once the GOB receives agreement.

5. (C) During the transition period, Abreu said it is possible that Viegas, working out of the foreign ministry, may be available to work with the USG on resolving the final issues in the bilateral effort to revise the 2000 Brazil-U.S. Technology Safeguards Agreement on participation of U.S. firms in commercial space launches at Brazil's Alcantara spaceport. Abreu and PolCouns agreed that the issue is well-advanced with good potential for a successful resolution,

6. (C) During a lunch at the Ambassador's residence on 4 November, PolCouns also discussed Viegas' resignation with Aldo Rebelo, Lula's Minister for Political Coordination. Rebelo opined that the Viegas resignation "had been predictable for some time" owing to the tensions between the minister and the senior levels of the armed forces. Rebelo said that Viegas had "performed admirably" in many of his duties, and he noted specifically Viegas' successful effort with the USG on the shootdown issue.

17. (C) But Rebelo, who was formerly chair of the foreign affairs and defense committee in Brazil's chamber of deputies, said Viegas' tenure as DefMin had personified "a clash of cultures" between two of Brazil's oldest institutions -- its foreign ministry and its armed forces. Rebelo said military officers had told him that Viegas, trained as a diplomat "to listen, negotiate and compromise," was out of step with military services that expect their senior leader "to issue orders and get results." Rebelo said the problem is not one of lack of respect in the military for civilian authority, but rather the military's preference in its civilian minister for a political figure capable of engaging with congress and the treasury to secure funding and protect prerogatives. Unlike Abreu, Rebelo opined that Alencar's assumption of the defense portfolio "could be only temporary." Rebelo has often been named as a possible replacement for Viegas, but Rebelo denied that possibility to PolCouns, saying such speculation is "media exaggeration."

18. (C) Comment. Viegas has been an effective and reliable interlocutor for the Mission and the USG on key policy issues in his broad area of responsibility, and he has been especially valuable in working with us on shootdown and Alcantara. Alencar, a likable and successful businessman, has not been especially distinguished as vice president, has no known experience with military matters, and does not strike us as having either the intellectual or diplomatic skills of Viegas. It remains to be seen how he will handle challenging issues, such as shootdown, Brazil's leadership of MINUSTAH in Haiti or complex civil aviation matters that fall in the purview of the defense ministry. However, his position as vice president and political savvy may make him an appealing choice, or at least a neutral one, in the armed forces' view. We do not see this development as an indication that Brazil's armed forces are restive and challenging civilian authority. On the contrary, today's Brazilian military is thoroughly apolitical. Nonetheless, the civilian ministry remains small and anemic compared to the armed services it ostensibly governs, and the Viegas era -- despite its accomplishments -- will not be remembered for reinforcing the institutional stature and effectiveness of the civilian MOD.